

Acceptance

By Casey Williams

Chapter One: Arrival In Denver

Matty stood at the baggage carousel, his small frame barely taller than the suitcase he was holding. At 4'3", he was often overlooked, his youthful appearance only accentuated by the oversized kids' clothes he wore. They didn't fit quite right—too baggy, too short—but they were comfortable, and it was all he could find that came close to his size.

The airport was busy, full of travellers bustling in every direction. Passengers from all walks of life moved with purpose, carrying suitcases and bags, rushing to their next destination. The loud whir of the carousel echoed around the large, modern space. There were digital signs hanging from the ceiling, showing flight information, and large windows let in the bright Colorado sunlight, offering a view of the bustling city beyond.

Matty felt the overwhelming weight of everything that had led up to this moment. The new town. The new life. Leaving everything he knew behind. His fur, a soft reddish-brown, itched slightly from the nervousness that gnawed at him. He tugged his small suitcase a little closer, adjusting the strap that dug into his shoulder.

Then, his phone buzzed, pulling him from his thoughts. It was a message from Hank: *"We're just outside the arrivals gate waiting for you."*

Matty stared at the message for a moment, the words comforting him in a way he hadn't expected. He smiled faintly, a rush of warmth spreading through his chest. Hank and Nina—his new family—had been there for him since the day he was born. They had offered him a place to stay, a fresh start.

Taking a deep breath, Matty straightened up and turned toward the entrance, his heart a little lighter than it had been just moments before. He wasn't alone in this.

The journey ahead was uncertain, but for the first time since he'd stepped off the plane, Matty felt a sense of hope.

Matty stepped through the sliding glass doors of the arrivals gate, feeling the weight of the world lift slightly with each step he took into the fresh air of Denver. The bustling noises of the airport faded to him as his eyes scanned the crowd.

Then, his gaze landed on them. Hank and Nina were waiting for him, standing just off to the side, their friendly faces shining with familiarity. Even though Matty hadn't seen them in person in years, their presence made him feel less alone.

Hank, the bear who had always felt like a second father, was the first to notice him. His broad frame—easily twice Matty's size—was still unmistakable, even in the crowd. He wore his signature square glasses, and his neatly trimmed beard

complemented his rugged yet approachable demeanour. He waved enthusiastically, a big grin spreading across his face.

"Matty!" Hank's voice rumbled like a friendly bass, "You made it!"

Nina, just as welcoming, was standing next to him, her lighter brown fur contrasting with Hank's darker shade. Despite being older, Nina carried herself with an easy grace. She looked young for her age – her kind eyes were a soft caramel colour, and her expression was both maternal and excited as she stepped forward to embrace Matty.

"Welcome to Denver, sweetie," she said, her tone warm, her hands smoothing over his shoulders in a comforting gesture, "We're so happy to have you here."

Matty's heart tightened a little, both from the warmth of their greeting and from the realisation that he was really here. He was in a new place, surrounded by a new family, and it felt overwhelming in the best possible way.

Junior, the bear cub, bounced excitedly at his feet, his large, round eyes lit up with pure joy. At just six years old, he looked much like Hank, only smaller and with more baby fat. He stood even in height to Matty, making him feel a little jealous. Junior had been counting down the days until Matty's arrival.

"Hi, Matty! I'm Junior!" He said with a giggle, bouncing on his heels, "You're gonna have so much fun here!"

Matty smiled, trying to push the nervous fluttering feeling in his stomach aside. "Hey, Junior," he said, accepting his high-five, "I'm looking forward to it."

Hank gave Matty a gentle pat on the back, his large paw nearly covering half of it. "Alright, kiddo, let's get you settled in."

Nina had already started loading Matty's suitcase into the trunk, moving with an ease that made everything seem routine. Despite the busyness of the airport drop-off zone, she stayed calm, her steady presence something Matty found himself clinging to.

Hank gestured towards the backseat, "You all set?"

Matty nodded hesitantly, still adjusting to the reality of being here. "Yeah... I think so."

As Nina shut the trunk with a soft thud, Hank opened the back passenger's door, revealing two car seats. As Nina helped Junior into his, Hank explained, "The seats were made for bigger furs, so we put in Junior's spare car seat for you."

Hank lifts Matty effortlessly, his strong arms making it feel as if Matty weighed nothing at all. He settled Matty onto the cushioned seat and carefully adjusted the straps before

buckling him in securely. Matty's ears flattened slightly as a wave of embarrassment washed over him. He was twenty years old, yet here he was, being placed in a child's car seat like a toddler. His tail curled around his lap as he tried to make himself smaller, hoping neither Nina nor Junior would make a comment. He avoided eye contact, staring down at the buckle in his lap, fingers idly tracing the harness as he tried to push the awkward feeling aside in his chest.

The drive started in comfortable silence, the hum of the car filling the space. Denver's skyline stretched in the distance, a mix of modern glass buildings and older brick structures. Snow dusted the sidewalks, and the streets bustled with life despite the chilly weather. Matty watched through the window, taking in the unfamiliar cityscape, his mind buzzing with a mixture of nerves and excitement.

Junior, sitting beside him, kicked his legs idly. "Are you gonna come to my school and pick me up sometimes?" he asked, his voice full of innocence.

Matty blinked, caught off guard. "Uh, maybe? I mean, I'll be in college, so I'll probably be busy."

Junior huffed dramatically. "College isn't that much harder than first grade."

Hank chuckled from the front seat. "You might be in for a surprise, bud."

Matty couldn't help but smile a little.

"Oh, Dad?" Junior bounced in his car seat a little, causing both Nina and Hank to chuckle.

"Yes, Junior?" Hank answered, still focusing on the road ahead.

"Did you see that they are releasing *Monstrox 5: Battle for Beastville*?! We have to go see it when it comes out!"

Hank let out a deep chuckle. "Another *Monstrox* movie already? Didn't the last one just come out?"

"Yeah, but it's the *best* franchise, Dad!" Junior declared, grabbing a toy figure of a cybernetic bear from his seat pocket. He roared dramatically, making the toy stomp in the air as if it were crushing imaginary buildings.

Hank glanced at him through the rearview mirror, shaking his head with an amused grin. "You and your monster movies..."

The car ride passed with light chatter, mostly Junior excitedly explaining the entire *Monstrox* franchise to Matty, who nodded along despite having no clue what half of it meant. Before long, the car pulled into a small private parking lot beside a cosy

brick building. A cafe sign hung above the entrance, its warm lights glowing against the early evening sky.

Hank carefully unbuckled Matty from the car seat as he walked closer to the building, craning his neck to take it all in. The bottom floor was clearly the cafe, with large windows showcasing an inviting space inside, filled with warm wooden furniture and string lights. A chalkboard sign by the door advertised daily specials in neat handwriting.

Hank walked to the side of the building, calling Matty over, revealing a separate entrance that led to a stairwell that wound up to the family's apartment.

Hank grabbed Matty's suitcase while Nina took Junior's hand, leading the way up the stairs. "Welcome home," she said with a smile as she pushed open the apartment door.

The inside was open and inviting, a mix of modern and rustic. The living room flowed seamlessly into the kitchen, with a large couch facing a TV mounted on the exposed brick wall. A dining table sat near the kitchen island with high stools. The apartment had a warm colour palette – deep browns, soft greens, and golden lighting that made everything feel homey. Large windows let in the last bits of the evening light, offering a view of the city beyond.

Hank set Matty's suitcase down by the hallway. "Alright, kiddo, what do you say to pizza for dinner? I'm thinking extra cheese, extra toppings—real 'welcome home' stuff."

Matty nodded, the idea of food helping ease some of his lingering nerves. "Yeah, that sounds great."

"Perfect. I'll order in a bit." Hank clapped a paw on Matty's shoulder before turning toward the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Nina gestured for Matty to follow her. "Come on, let's get you settled in your room."

She led him down the hall to a door at the end, pushing it open to reveal a spacious bedroom. A large window took up most of one wall, letting in the city lights. The bed, positioned against the opposite wall, was neatly made with a thick, cosy-looking blanket. There was a desk against the side wall, a soft rug on the floor, and a dresser nearby. The space was simple but welcoming.

Matty took a step inside, but his eyes immediately landed on the bed. His ears twitched as he realised it was nearly double his size. He wasn't getting up there easily.

Nina must've noticed because she stepped back out for a moment and returned carrying a small step stool. She placed it beside the bed with a knowing smile. "There. That should help."

Matty hesitated, feeling an odd mix of gratitude and self-consciousness. "Uh, thanks..."

Nina sat on the edge of the bed, her expression soft. "Matty, this is your home now too. You don't have to feel like a guest. Make this space yours, okay?"

Matty looked around again, taking in the room not just as a temporary stop but as *his* space. Slowly, he nodded. "Okay."

Matty had only just started unpacking his boxes, sorting through clothes and personal belongings, when exhaustion began to settle in. The long day of travelling weighed on him, making everything feel like a blur. As he stacked another box against the others, he swore he heard a faint *rustling* behind him.

He turned, blinking at the pile of unopened boxes near the dresser. Something felt... off. One of them seemed slightly out of place, but with his brain still foggy from the trip, he brushed it off. *Probably just my imagination...*

With a small sigh, he reached for one of the lids, ready to pry it open.

Suddenly—

"RAWR!"

Junior burst out of the box like a jack-in-the-box, arms raised in a playful pounce.

Matty yelped in surprise, stumbling backward before landing hard on his tail. His ears flattened as he stared up at the grinning bear cub, whose giggles filled the room.

"Gotcha!" Junior declared triumphantly.

Matty groaned, rubbing his lower back as he sat up. "Junior! What the heck!?"

Junior just plopped onto the floor, grinning ear to ear. "You should've seen your face!"

Matty scowled, crossing his arms. "Yeah, yeah, hilarious."

Junior, completely unfazed, flopped onto his stomach and started rolling around on the floor. "I was so bored. Mom and Dad are talking about boring adult stuff, but now I have someone new to play with!" His tail wagged as he looked up at Matty expectantly.

Junior didn't answer. Instead, he rolled over onto his paws and scampered over to Matty's dresser. With zero hesitation, he yanked open the drawer and started rummaging through the clothes Matty had already put away.

"Hey!" Matty scrambled to his feet. "Don't just—"

"Oooh!" Junior's eyes lit up as he pulled out a pair of underwear featuring *Detective Pibbles*, a cartoon pit bull dressed in an old-timey detective coat, complete with a magnifying glass.

Junior gasped dramatically, holding it up like it was a priceless treasure. "You like *Detective Pibbles!*?"

Matty's fur bristled as his face burnt. "No," he said quickly. *Too quickly.*

Matty's ears flattened as he looked away. "Because I don't exactly have a choice," he muttered. "It's either this or plain ones with dinosaurs and race cars."

Junior gasped. "You could've picked dinosaurs!?"

Matty shot him a look. "That's not the point."

Junior, still grinning, wiggled the underwear in front of him. "Sooo... you do like *Detective Pibbles*?"

Matty hesitated before huffing, tail flicking behind him. "I *did* when I was younger," he said, trying to sound nonchalant.

Junior squinted at him. "You still watch it, don't you?"

Matty scoffed. "No."

"*Liar!*" Junior pointed an accusing paw. "What's your favourite episode!?"

Matty faltered. "...I don't have one."

Junior smirked. "Then you wouldn't know about the one where he—"

"*Fine!*" Matty groaned, covering his face. "I still watch it, okay!?" He peeked through his fingers. "Happy?"

Junior, completely unbothered, flopped back onto Matty's bed with a content sigh. "This is so cool. Now I have a *Detective Pibbles* buddy!"

Matty rubbed his face, sighing. *I just got here, and I already have a six-year-old raiding my drawers.*

Still... Looking at Junior's wide, excited grin, it was hard to stay annoyed.

Matty still hated how small he was compared to other animals, and this was yet another reminder.

"Sorry, bud, but with our big furniture, you'll need a booster seat like Junior," Hank said as he secured the seat onto one of the dining chairs. He carefully checked the straps, making sure everything was in place before stepping back.

Matty's ears flicked back as he eyed the seat, a familiar wave of frustration bubbling up. He knew Hank wasn't trying to embarrass him, but it didn't make it any less frustrating.

Hank carefully lifted Matty into the booster seat, setting him down gently before stepping back. Matty immediately reached for the waist restraints, making sure they were tight enough—he wasn't about to risk sliding off in front of everyone.

His gaze dropped to the slice of pizza on his plate. It was nearly half the size of his head. He blinked. Was this... normal for bears? He guessed so.

“Oh, Matty, do you want me to cut up your slice for you?” Nina asked, holding up a knife.

Matty's ears flattened as a rush of heat crept up his face. He could do it himself, but everything in the apartment was nearly double his size. The utensils, the chairs, even the pizza slices—it was all made with much bigger animals in mind. The only things he could probably use comfortably were the plastic cutlery Junior had.

“Umm... I guess so, if it's not too much trouble,” Matty mumbled, avoiding eye contact.

"Nonsense; of course I can help you. It's no problem," Nina said with a warm smile as she expertly cut his slice into smaller, manageable pieces.

Matty shifted in his seat, feeling a little embarrassed but also grateful. It wasn't like he wanted to struggle with something as simple as eating pizza. He stabbed one of the pieces with his fork, taking a bite while trying to ignore the way Junior was watching him curiously.

"You know, you kind of eat like me," Junior said, grinning.

Matty sighed, resting his elbow on the table. "Yeah, yeah, rub it in, why don't you?"

Hank chuckled. "Hey, kiddo, no shame in making things easier for yourself. Besides, if it means you get to enjoy your pizza without a fight, I'd say it's worth it."

Matty huffed but couldn't argue with that. He popped another bite into his mouth, trying to focus on the taste instead of the fact that, once again, he felt like the odd one out.

As dinner wrapped up, Nina glanced over at Junior, who was barely keeping his eyes open. The little bear had spent most of the meal rambling excitedly about Detective Pibbles and Monstrox, but now his words were slurring together, and his head kept bobbing forward.

“Alright, buddy, time for bed,” Nina said, standing up and ruffling Junior’s fur.

Junior groaned in protest, rubbing his eyes. “But I want to stay up with Matty...”

“You’ll see him in the morning,” she assured him with a chuckle, gently unbuckling him from his booster seat. “Come on now.”

Junior pouted but didn’t fight it as Nina scooped him up effortlessly. His tiredness won out, and by the time she carried him down the hall, he was already resting his head against her shoulder.

Matty shifted in his seat, feeling the exhaustion start to catch up to him too. It had been a long day—travelling, meeting the Grizzlies again, getting used to everything. He yawned, rubbing at his eyes before Hank patted his back.

“C’mon, kiddo, let’s get you settled in too,” Hank said, standing and helping Matty out of his booster seat.

Matty didn’t argue. His limbs felt heavy as Hank guided him toward his bedroom. The moment they stepped inside, Matty felt an odd sense of comfort. The room wasn’t quite his yet, but it was starting to feel like it could be. His unpacked boxes sat in the corner, and the bed—ridiculously big for him—looked more inviting than ever.

Hank pulled back the covers, then turned to Matty. “Need help getting up?”

Matty huffed but nodded. He was too tired to put up much of a fight. Without a word, Hank lifted him with ease, setting him down on the soft mattress.

“Thanks,” Matty muttered, sinking into the blankets.

“No problem, kiddo.” Hank gave him a pat on the head, then stepped back toward the door. “Get some rest. Tomorrow’s a new day.”

Matty let out a sleepy hum in response, barely managing to mumble a “goodnight” before his eyes slipped shut. As Hank flicked off the light and gently closed the door, Matty let himself relax for the first time that day.

New home, new life. It was overwhelming, sure. But lying there, wrapped in the quiet warmth of his new room, Matty thought—just maybe—he could get used to this.

Chapter Two: Wet Again

A dull hum filled the air. Matty shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his ears flicking as he tried to focus. Something felt... off.

He glanced around. The classroom was familiar—rows of desks, a whiteboard at the front, the faint scent of old paper and dry-erase markers lingering in the air. The walls were covered with posters of historical figures and motivational slogans like “*Strive for Success!*” and “*Knowledge is Power!*” The fluorescent lights overhead buzzed softly, casting a slightly yellowish hue over everything.

He knew this place. It was his old high school classroom.

But something wasn’t right.

The air felt heavy, thick like a humid summer day, making it hard to breathe. The faces of the students around him blurred at the edges, their features shifting, morphing in ways he couldn’t quite pin down. He couldn’t recognise anyone, even though he knew he *should*.

“Matty.”

His ears perked up at the sound of his name. The teacher—an older golden retriever with a sweater vest—was standing at the front of the room, tapping a ruler against the whiteboard. A

math problem was scrawled in marker behind him, something about algebra.

“Why don’t you give this one a shot?” the teacher asked, smiling.

Matty hesitated. He hadn’t been paying attention.

But that was fine. He was good at maths.

He nodded, pushing himself up onto his seat to be seen over the desk. He raised his paw, clearing his throat, ready to speak—

A warm sensation spread down his leg.

His stomach twisted as dread sank its claws deep into his chest. No, no, no—

He looked down. His jeans darkened, the wetness spreading rapidly across his lap, dripping onto the tile floor with quiet, damning splashes. His breath hitched.

Whispers filled the air.

Then laughter.

Snickers, growing louder, blending together into an awful, echoing chorus.

Matty's head snapped up. The students around him were no longer blurred—they were staring at him, grins twisting into something *wrong*. Their faces warped, their eyes bulging, their mouths stretching far too wide, revealing rows of jagged teeth. Their fur bristled unnaturally, limbs elongating, bodies bending in impossible ways.

“Ewww, Matty peed himself!”

“Like a little kid!”

The laughter grew deafening, ringing in his ears. The walls of the classroom seemed to close in, warping like a funhouse mirror. The fluorescent lights flickered, casting eerie shadows across the grotesque faces sneering at him.

Matty wanted to run, to hide, to *wake up*—

Something grabbed his wrist.

He gasped.

Matty jolted awake, breath hitching in his throat as his eyes flew open.

For a second, he didn't know where he was. The room was dark and unfamiliar, his heart still pounding from the dream. His fur was damp with sweat, clinging uncomfortably to his skin. His

arms were wrapped tightly around his pillow, his fingers gripping the fabric like a lifeline.

Then he shifted slightly—

Cold.

The realisation crept in slowly, like a slow trickle of ice water down his spine.

His sheets were cold.

Matty blinked, still groggy, but the reality of it hit him like a freight train. He kicked the blankets off in a panic, pressing his paw against the mattress beneath him.

Wet.

He had wetted the bed.

Again.

His breath hitched as he stared down at the damp sheets, horror creeping up his spine like a living thing.

No. No, no, no—

Matty scrambled to sit up, ears flattening as his tail curled around his waist. His hands shook as he reached for the box of tissues on the nightstand, yanking a handful out and pressing them against the wet spot as if that would somehow fix it.

But it was too much. The tissues were useless.

Matty's breathing turned shallow, his chest tightening. His mind raced.

Maybe if he stripped the bed now, no one would notice. Maybe he could hide the sheets, wash them before anyone found out.

Maybe—

The door creaked open.

“Hey, kiddo, do you want—”

Matty froze.

Hank stood in the doorway, his massive frame filling the entrance. He had barely got the words out before his eyes landed on the mess of blankets, the crumpled tissues, and the unmistakable look of panic on Matty's face.

Matty felt his heart drop to his stomach.

Hank didn't say anything at first. His expression softened, and the casual ease in his stance shifted into something quieter. Something more careful.

Matty couldn't take it.

“I—I'm sorry,” he blurted out, his voice barely above a whisper. His throat felt tight, his face burning with humiliation. “I didn't

mean to—I don’t know why—I just—” His breath hitched, panic setting in full force. “I—”

Hank moved before Matty could spiral any further.

Warm arms wrapped around him, steady and strong, pulling him into a hug. Matty stiffened at first, but as Hank rubbed slow, reassuring circles into his back, something in him crumbled.

“It’s okay,” Hank murmured. “Breathe, kiddo. Deep breaths.”

Matty tried, squeezing his eyes shut as he pressed his face against Hank’s shirt. His body trembled, his breath shaky and uneven. But slowly—painfully slowly—his heartbeat began to settle.

Hank pulled back slightly, giving him space but keeping a reassuring paw on his shoulder. “Let’s get you cleaned up, alright?”

Matty hesitated. His pride screamed at him to refuse, to insist he could handle it. But shame sat heavy in his chest, making it impossible to speak.

Instead, he nodded.

Without a word, Hank helped him out of his damp underwear, wrapping a thick, warm blanket around his shoulders. Matty clung to it, his ears still flattened in embarrassment.

“You’re safe,” Hank said gently. “And I won’t say anything to Junior, okay?”

Matty swallowed hard, nodding again.

“...Thanks,” he mumbled.

Hank didn’t press him further, just gave him a reassuring squeeze before scooping him up effortlessly.

Hank carefully lifted Matty, holding him effortlessly in one massive paw. Matty let out a small squeak, his ears flattening against his head as his face burnt with embarrassment. He wasn’t a kid, but the way Hank carried him made him feel small—like he weighed nothing at all.

He curled into the blanket wrapped around him, trying to make himself smaller as Hank stepped out of the room, glancing left and right down the dimly lit hallway. The last thing Matty needed was for Junior to wake up and see this.

Once the coast was clear, Hank strode across the hall, pushing open the bathroom door with his free paw before stepping inside. He shut it quietly behind them, flipping the lock with a soft click.

Matty breathed a little easier knowing they wouldn’t be interrupted.

The bathroom was huge—like everything else in the Grizzles' home. To Matty, the tub might as well have been a small pool. He stared as Hank turned on the water, steam rising as it filled.

Hank set Matty down gently on the closed toilet lid before twisting the faucet on. Water rushed out, quickly filling the massive tub as steam curled into the air. Matty pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders, watching as Hank reached in to test the temperature with practiced ease.

"Not too hot, not too cold," Hank murmured, adjusting the knobs until he was satisfied. The warm bathroom light reflected off the water's surface, its ripples gently distorting the glow.

"You don't have to talk about it," he said. "But I've found that letting things out is better than keeping them in."

Matty hesitated, his grip tightening on the blanket.

After a long pause, he let out a small, shaky breath.

"I've... always been like this," he admitted. "Anytime I get really stressed, it just... happens."

Hank nodded, his expression free of judgement or pity. Just quiet understanding.

Matty rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

“There’s nothing to be sorry for, kiddo,” Hank reassured him, ruffling his fur before standing. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Then we’ll figure out the rest together.”

Matty wasn’t sure how much he believed that. But as Hank stayed by his side, he realised—for the first time in a long time—that maybe he didn’t have to handle everything alone.

Matty’s tail curled around his leg as he sat there in silence, the embarrassment still gnawing at him. He hated this—hated that he was in this situation, hated that Hank had to help him like he was some helpless cub.

Hank turned back to him, his expression as calm and steady as ever. “You want bubbles?” he asked casually, as if this was just a normal night.

Matty blinked, caught off guard by the question. “...Huh?”

Hank lifted a bottle of bubble bath from the counter, wiggling it slightly. “Figured it might help you relax.”

Matty hesitated. He hadn’t used bubble bath in years—probably not since he was Junior’s age. It felt childish. But at the same time, the idea of sinking into warm, soapy water where he didn’t have to think for a while... It actually sounded kind of nice.

“...Yeah. Sure,” he mumbled.

Hank gave a small nod before pouring some in. The water frothed instantly, white foam spreading across the surface. Matty watched as the bubbles rose higher, the scent of lavender filling the air.

For the first time that night, he felt just a little bit calmer.

Once the water was at an acceptable level, Hank turned the faucet off carefully, watching the steam rise before stepping back. He gave Matty a reassuring smile as he grabbed his newspaper from the counter.

"I'll sit right outside to make sure you don't have any problems, okay?" His tone was casual, but there was a softness to it—an unspoken promise that Matty wasn't alone in this.

Matty nodded, still feeling the lingering embarrassment in his chest. He knew Hank wasn't judging him, but the thought of being watched over, even indirectly, made him feel both comforted and small.

Once Matty was done bathing, Hank returned, holding a towel draped over one arm and a neatly folded set of clothes in the other—fresh underwear, a t-shirt, and jeans. Without a word, he set them on the counter before reaching down to help Matty out of the bath. The warmth of the water was quickly replaced by the cool air, making Matty shiver as Hank wrapped the towel around him.

"There you go, kiddo," Hank said gently, patting Matty's back through the towel. "I'll see you at the breakfast table, alright?" His tone was light and reassuring, as if to say everything was normal. Like this wasn't a big deal.

Matty nodded, but as the bathroom door clicked shut, leaving him alone, the weight of everything settled in. He rubbed the towel over his fur absentmindedly, staring at his reflection in the mirror. He had hoped that moving to a new place and being surrounded by new people would make things different. That maybe his old problems would finally go away. But here he was again. No matter where he went, they followed him like shadows.

Shaking the thoughts away, Matty dressed quickly and made his way to the dining table. He climbed onto his booster seat, securing the strap around his waist before leaning closer to the table. The scent of syrup and warm butter filled the air, but it did little to stir his appetite.

Before he could dwell on it, something soft suddenly pressed against his face.

"Rawr!"

Matty flinched, his heart jumping into his throat as Junior popped up beside him, shoving a Monstrox plush right into his

face. His ears flattened as he instinctively clutched his chest, trying to steady his breathing.

“Junior,” Nina’s voice came firm but calm.

Junior shrank back slightly, stuffing his toy against his chest. “Sorry, Matty...” he mumbled, kicking his legs under the table.

Matty exhaled shakily, forcing a small nod. He wasn’t mad—he knew Junior hadn’t meant to scare him—but his nerves were still rattled from everything that morning.

His gaze drifted to the pancake on his plate, golden and fluffy, drizzled with syrup. He reached out, poking at it with his finger.

He just wasn’t feeling hungry anymore.

Hank watched Matty pick at his pancake, his ears drooping slightly as he pushed the food around his plate. He glanced at Nina, who met his gaze with quiet understanding. With a soft sigh, Hank reached out and patted Matty’s shoulder.

“Hey, kiddo, you don’t have to force yourself to eat if you’re not feeling up to it,” he said gently. “We’ll keep them in the fridge for later, so you can have them whenever you’re ready.”

Matty’s ears twitched, guilt creeping into his chest. “Sorry...” he mumbled, slipping off his booster seat.

"You don't have to be sorry," Hank reassured him, but Matty was already making his way back to his room, his tail dragging behind him.

Once inside, he closed the door behind him and exhaled, rubbing his arms as he walked toward his bed. He unzipped his backpack, pulling out his laptop before settling on the floor, leaning his back against the bed frame.

Matty opened his browser, hesitating before typing:

"Bedwetting in teens."

Dozens of results popped up, but as he scrolled, his stomach tightened. Almost every site was geared toward young kids, with cartoons of toddlers in pull-ups and advice for parents. Nothing for someone *his* age.

His ears burnt as he shut the tab, feeling even worse than before. He stared toward the small laundry bin in the corner, where his underwear from this morning sat crumpled among his clothes. His fists clenched. *Why now? Why did this have to start again?*

A knock at the door made him jolt.

"Matty?" Junior's voice was bright as he peeked in. "Want to play a game with me?"

Matty blinked, his thoughts scattering. "Uh... yeah, sure."

He followed Junior across the hall into his room. The walls were painted light blue and decorated with scattered fish, and the floor was covered by a colourful car mat. Toys were still strewn about, some half-stacked, others looking like they'd been abandoned mid-play.

As Junior plugged in the controllers and booted up the console, Matty wandered around, taking in the room. His bed was bigger than Matty expected, but it had bars along the sides, much like a toddler bed. Then again, bears grew fast, so maybe this was just practical.

His eyes drifted toward a nearby dresser, its drawers left half-open with clothes still hanging out. Beside them was something else.

“Mom says I need to get better at putting my clothes away,” Junior said, laughing sheepishly. “She says soon I’ll be a big bear and need to learn to do stuff on my own.”

Matty chuckled, but then Junior’s gaze followed his, landing on the object Matty had been staring at.

“Oh! My old diapers!”

Before Matty could react, Junior pulled one from a small hamper inside the drawer, holding it up proudly.

“I just finished potty training, so I don’t need these anymore,” he explained, grinning.

Matty’s eyebrows raised slightly. *He’s six and only just finished?* Then again, different species developed at different rates. It made sense, but it was still surprising.

Junior unfolded one of them, stretching it out as he inspected it. Then, with curiosity sparking in his eyes, he held it up near Matty’s waist.

“I suppose even though these are for baby bears, they’d fit adult foxes just fine.”

Matty’s face turned bright red. “W-We should start the game,” he stammered, quickly grabbing his controller and turning toward the screen.

Junior just giggled, dropping the diaper back into the drawer before hopping onto the bed. “Alright! But I get first pick of the characters!”

Matty let out a breath, glad the subject had changed, but he couldn’t shake the lingering heat in his face.

As the game loaded, Matty tried to focus, gripping his controller tightly. The bright, colourful characters danced across the screen, and Junior bounced excitedly beside him.

But Matty's mind drifted. His fingers moved on autopilot, but his thoughts lingered on that drawer, on Junior's words, and on the damp sheets from that morning.

No matter how far he went, no matter how much he tried to move forward—his problems always found a way to follow.

He exhaled, forcing a small smile as Junior cheered, nudging him playfully.

"Better keep up, Matty! I'm gonna win!"

Matty chuckled, shaking his head. "Yeah, yeah. We'll see about that."

For now, he let himself get lost in the game.